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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a model student leadership program and an evaluation of its effectiveness. This model, which considers positive personal contact between students and staff to be a key element in student leadership training, is designed to have a positive impact on student development and campus life. The basic training strategy is explained as a concentration in daily operations on the development of student leadership skills among officers of campus clubs and organizations. Guiding principles of the program include teaching students to accept responsibility for self-development and to contribute to their community. The model project is detailed from the preparation and data-gathering stage through the first leadership workshop, participant recruitment, on-going program implementation, and evaluation. Problems of orientation, coordination, student retention, a lack of leadership skills, and continuity are addressed; solutions are also suggested. An evaluation conducted after two years of program implementation is discussed. (NRB)

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Student Leadership Training: A Key to Improving the Quality of College Life.

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A model student leadership program, including an evaluation of its effectiveness. The model holds that a key element in the student leadership program is positive personal contact between students and staff. The objective is student development, the methodology is student leadership training, and the end result is an improved quality of college life.

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Student Leadership Training: A Key to Improving the Quality of College Life

Student affairs programs will assume a more crucial, central role in institutions of higher education in the 1980's and 90's, primarily because they are the component of institutions of higher education dealing most directly and effectively with the improvement of the quality of student life and, consequently, with the problem of student retention. With a declining pool of traditional students projected for the 80's and 90's, retaining those students who will eventually enter institutions of higher education will take on major importance. Proportionate losses incurred like those of the 50's, 60's and 70's would, more than likely, bring about a decline in the funding of America's colleges and universities. The literature of the 70's predicted the importance of student affairs would decline, but, to the contrary, in trying times institutions, in order to survive, turn to their bread and butter - student enrollment and the fees it generates, either through a state funding formula or through direct tuition dollars generated by student retention.

Common sense or merely observation and familiarization with students in the higher education setting leads one to the conclusion that students who are involved and participate in campus life have the greatest likelihood of experiencing graduation. Furthermore, the single most important element in creating involvement and participation in campus life is some form of positive personal contact with students

Theory

Obviously, there are many forms that positive personal contact with students may assume and be effectively translated into programs.

In particular, one such approach selected at Rockhurst College was entitled the "Comprehensive Student Development Grant Program," which was written, submitted and eventually funded to establish and implement a student leadership training program. The student leadership training program was designed to have a positive impact on campus life. The basic strategy employed was to concentrate heavily in the day-to-day operations on the development of student leadership skills among the officers of the clubs and organizations on campus. The strategy was to create a cadre of student leaders who would, as more effective and efficient leaders of their respective organizations, enhance and improve not only themselves, and their organizations, but also the overall quality and quantity of the activities in which they were involved. The end result of this effort with the student leaders was projected to be an improvement in the quality of student life, eventuating in increased opportunities for involvement and participation for all students on the college campus. An analogy which seems instructive is to consider student leaders as the keys to opening the doors to increased opportunities for involvement of the entire student body in campus life. What was needed was a small number of students to effect a large number.

An aside (but an important one) in these troubled economic times, there probably is no less expensive labor available to the college campus than the student worker - generally volunteer (free), but always comparatively inexpensive. From an expense standpoint, you can get numerous Resident Assistants, Peer Ministers, Orientation Leaders, Student Government Officers, etc., for what it costs to purchase the services of one faculty member or administrator.

However, the great advantage of using student peer-group labor is not a direct economic benefit (which surely exists), but by having students perform vital tasks for the institution, an ironic situation develops - they begin to participate, become involved, and eventually feel as if they are an important and useful element in the higher education process.

Leaders are there among the student body, encouraging and developing them is the task of the college staff. Students are searching for a sense of identity and community, which involvement and participation in campus life can provide for the benefit of all involved: the institution and the student. In searching for student leaders among the student body, watch for the ones who won't procrastinate and the ones who do what they are called upon to do, plus the ones who respond at critical times and are there when needed, and, just as importantly, the ones who are not afraid to fail. The answer to the question: What separates a student leader from a follower? seems to be the person who will make a committment and take action to implement that committment!

The college staff must be able to do the very things they are asking the student leaders to do: they, essentially, must learn to build a team to accomplish goals, delegate authority and assume responsibility. The goal of the college staff and the student leaders is the same: to have followers accept the committment which the leaders have already made.

The guiding principles of the student leadership project were to teach students to accept responsibility for self-development and for contributing to the community of which they were a part. The students learn that one can make a difference in the environment by accepting responsibility and by using one's influence to effect desirable changes and directions. The principles were taught by using a multi-faceted

approach and by the timely introduction of finely targeted stages of programming. Some facets, such as budgeting procedures, were introduced informally and gradually moved into formal presentations. Other facets, such as student leadership sessions, were introduced formally and phased out as students began to demonstrate acceptance and responsibility and picked up these activities as part of their own program.

The objective is student development, the methodology is student leadership training, and the end result is an improved quality of student life. As the Dean and Assistant Dean of Students have directed the grant staff, "Challenge student leaders to be more than they are; it is not enough to just do the job, it must be done as if in a quest for excellence." In essence, state expectations and then hold them (student leaders) responsible. The process of setting goals, staying within a budget (which they have helped establish), and implementing and evaluating a program, are tremendous learning experiences for students. Generally the grant program found that students will perform up to expectations, if they are stated plainly, and the students are given the proper guidance and attention they need. Student leaders must be challenged to lead.

The Student Leadership Model

During the first six months of the project, the coordinator, by building contacts and relationships, was preparing and gathering data for the first leadership workshop which was offered after the new officers of the respective organizations were elected to their positions. The outgoing officers were used as resource persons, both for the respective organizations and for the all-campus leadership workshops, thereby

providing the initial effort toward developing continuity of leadership and leadership training. The first leadership workshop served as an opportunity for self-evaluation of past organizational programming, and as an occassion to plan and prepare budgets and a proposed calendar of events for the upcoming year. The students learned how to preserve their plans and the importance of passing this information on to incoming groups. During the second year, the staff worked with clubs and organizations on modifying and implementing their plans. After this annual cycle was established, some organizations, because of their permanent status, needed only occassional and indirect assistance. The staff was continually available for advice and guidance to the various student groups, particularly new student groups as they sought official recognition on campus. The staff served as a much-needed stabilizing influence for new and developing organizations and also provided liaison and continuity with the administration of the college.

At Rockhurst College, an extensive effort has been made to involve incoming freshmen in activities designed to facilitate their campus socialization and familiarity with the college, its students, and its programs. Much effort through the addition of the student leadership grant program has been expended to continue this involvement beyond the one-week program of orientation, because the upper-class students and student services staff responsible for freshmen orientation must give their attention to other duties and the momentum generated by the program is lost. Through the addition of the student leadership grant program, student services was provided the capability of sustaining the effect of the freshmen orientation program which it was felt would do much to improve the quality of student life on campus.

Studies on student retention frequently cite student involvement during the first few weeks in school as a key factor in determining which students remain in school and, therefore, which ones have the opportunity to derive the benefits from the college experience. Student Services did not have the personnel to help maintain the enthusiasm and involvement generated through the orientation program, thus it was decided to get student leaders of clubs and organizations on campus involved in the orientation process, which would accomplish at least two things: (1) inform new students of what was available for their participation in the realm of extracurricular activities, and (2) actually recruit some of the new students into activities which they could be involved throughout the college experience. It is difficult to ascertain who benefits most by this new arrangement: the student leaders who work and represent their organization during orientation week or the new students freshly arrived on campus. Perhaps, it is mutually beneficial and all who participate gain from the experience.

Still another problem to be faced was the apparent lack of leadership skills hampering the planning, implementation and effectiveness of the programs sponsored by student groups. In some cases there was little or no carry-over from year to year of the results of the time and effort spent by student leaders in implementing their programs. The plans and efforts by student leaders often became lost, filed or forgotten by successive groups involved in a particular organization. Consequently, many organizations found themselves perpetually in the "start-up phase" of development. There was little opportunity to build on past successes and to learn from past failures. The tradition of leadership was not passed on and each successive group of student

leaders was frustrated by the overwhelming task of generating student interest and involvement in new activities at the same time they were learning how to plan and to implement the present programs.

One way to solve the problem of continuity was to utilize what has been termed the "mentor relationship", in this case, between upper- and lower-class students. The upper-class officers of the various clubs and organizations were encouraged to take under their supervision and guidance an under-class student in order to impart the wisdom and the experience they have gained over the years. Additionally, an unexpected benefit of this approach was that these were often very satisfying relationships between individuals, sometimes forming contacts which lasted past graduation, improving the continuity of the organization, and enhancing the overall quality of student life at the institution.

Another area of concern was that there was little sustained coordination between major student organizations. Student leadership coordination in the grant program was striven for in an attempt to expand the capability of each group as well as avoid the waste and lost opportunities resulting from duplication of efforts and events. By providing sustained day-to-day coordination and attention to the details of contact and follow-up on the many worthwhile student leadership efforts, the benefits to the students were seen in better organizational programming. Overall, coordination efforts demonstrated to the students their capability for effective input and provided a feeling among student leaders of their ability to manage their campus environment, and helped to create and maintain the kind of campus climate which students and the college community prize.

Along with the efforts in the area of leadership development the climate of student life was assessed by the college staff on the basis of dialogue with students and from observations of student life day-to-day. The data gathered was used to identify and formulate topics for a series of awareness seminars related to the personal concerns and needs of the students. These awareness seminars would usually have a single emphasis and would be offered as the need for them was identified. They were campus-wide (open to all interested students), and were designed for the major purpose of increasing the awareness of the students in an important social, personal, or interpersonal aspect of student life. Campus-wide awareness seminars were held on such topics as: alcohol awareness, personal safety and self-defense, problems in living, interpersonal communications, time management, choking seminars, and other pertinent campus issues.

The content of the leadership skills sessions was oriented toward enabling the student leaders to better plan, implement, evaluate and continue the activities of their respective organizations. These leadership skill development sessions covered such topics as budgeting and finance, group process and communications, decision making and goal setting, delegation and organizational skills, programming and evaluation, networking, and other leadership skills believed necessary to accomplish the goals of the various student groups on campus. The student leaders who sponsor the training sessions receive the experience of being responsible and coordinating the activities of several people. They decide on the topic, hire the consultant, set the date, reserve the room, budget the funds, monitor the expenditure, and evaluate the success of the program. This could only be classified as a valuable learning experience

for the students involved, including the ones who took part in the workshops.

Examples of some of the clubs and organizations at Rockhurst College that operate on this basis are: the Student Yearbook, the Student Newspaper, the Black Student Union, the Student Government, the Social Activities Board, and many others. In addition to general leadership skills sessions, many technical skills; e.g., photography, journalistic writing, etc., are learned which may be very useful later in one's career or in life after graduation. Campus organizations create many opportunities for students to participate and become involved in the college community as a contributing and responsible member, which can only enhance the retention rate. A general rule that has developed thus far is that the more the students are asked to do the more they become involved and buy into the product, resulting in pride and ownership in the institution.

Thus far, at least three lessons have been learned by the staff at Rockhurst College regarding the implementation of student leadership programs: (1) There can be no substitute for the development of personal contact and interaction between staff and student leaders - a key element is the rapport established between staff and student leaders, (2) The work site or school setting is the best location for the development of leadership skills among student leaders. Some of the best consultants for leadership workshops were members of the immediate faculty and administration, (3) Student leaders of campus organizations, given the resources, support and guidance of college staff, can often provide a better student activity than professionals in the field.

Although providing a series of activities for students cannot

be expected to be a panacea for all the problems described, it was believed, and according to the preliminary evaluation, evident that a comprehensive student leadership program designed to teach students their responsibility in setting the tone of their own living environment, and the skills necessary to effect some control over the environment, can do much to improve the quality of student life. A comprehensive student leadership program designed to help students develop the leadership skills needed to initiate and maintain a program of activities can be very beneficial to the individual student leader, the club or organization, and, in turn, through the organizations' activities, contribute to the enrichment of campus life for the entire college community.

Evaluation

The rationale behind student leadership training is to get students to buy into or accept responsibility for the program, which inturn has a positive impact upon the overall quality of college life. In an attempt to discover whether there actually was an improvement in college life, several aspects of campus life were pre-selected for measurement as indicators of the improvement of student life.

Comparative data is not in for the third year of the student leadership training program, but the following percentage improvements have been recorded and measured after two years: student participation in voting, committee work, and dorm councils (self-governance activities) increased 46% over the two-year period; the number of student-initiated events per year registered no change; the students' dependence on college staff for assistance declined 69%; the students' completion rate of student-event evaluation forms increased 53%; the number of pre-filed

student-event approval forms increased 6%; the number of positive versus negative citations for student behavior increased 73%; the number of off-campus housing requests, although a decrease had been projected, increased 20% (explained later in the narrative); the students' completion rate in the dormitory without referrals for improper social behavior showed no change; students requesting a change of roommates because of incompatibility declined 40%; students' satisfaction with the quality of student life increased 14%; student participation in organized activities increased 43%; vandalism decreased 67%; student social behavior in the cafeteria was improved as indicated by a decrease in the breach of rules by 33%; student attendance at scholarly lectures increased 40%; the number of on-campus cultural activities increased by 100% (also explained later in the narrative); the "Ticket Information Center" or "Box Office" was established and began operation during the second year of the program, thus no comparative data is available at this time; the number of off-campus cultural and recreational events attended by students increased by 11%.

Duplication of the time and effort required to record and measure the changes in the projected performance evaluation measures was extraordinarily large, thus if other institutions can use these measures as indicators they will save themselves a tremendous amount of staff time and effort; however, it should be kept in mind that each institution is different and each will, to a certain extent, be effected differently.

Of course, intervening variables may come into play which cause an improvement or decline in the performance evaluation measures, but those unforseen circumstances must be accepted as the luck of the draw, and the hope is that they average out over time. An example of how an

unforseen intervening variable can skew the performance evaluation measure negatively was what happened on the number of off-campus housing requests (number 7). The student government and some other students on campus desired a change in the off-campus housing regulations which inevitably (although it had nothing to do with the student leadership program) brought the issue forward, creating a huge number of off-campus requests, when, in fact, a decline had been projected. On the other hand, some intervening variables cause positive results which, again were not the result of the student leadership program, but do cause what appears to be an increase or improvement. For example, it had been projected that the student leadership training program would, theoretically, bring about an increased number of students attending on-campus cultural events (100% increase was recorded on that particular performance evaluation measure), when , in fact, what seems to have happened was that a college "Committee on the Arts" was formed which had as its goal the presentation of cultural events on campus, which explains very nicely the increase - without a student leadership program. However, other than the two performance evaluation measures mentioned thus far as being affected both negatively and positively by intervening variables, none of the others could be explained away in such a fashion.

What can actually be attributable to the student leadership program in terms of its effect upon the quality of campus life as measured by the performance evaluation measures is highly debatable. But of the variables pre-selected as indicators of the improvement of the quality of student life, 13 showed improvement, 2 showed no change, and, 1 actually had a negative effect, for whatever reasons, on student life.

Conclusion

The development of a student leadership training program on other campuses may be what is needed to improve the quality of student life. Working with a few students to reach many may be an approach beneficial to other institutions of higher education.

The staff of the grant at Rockhurst College learned what they felt distinguished a student leader from a follower: the student leader was the one who made a committment (set goals) and worked toward implementation of those goals. Further, the student leader was the one who could not only withstand the influence of peers, but, reversed that process, and changed and effected the peer group in a positive manner. In essence, the student leaders' task was to build a team which could work to accomplish the goals of the organizations.

Students eventually will, with or without a student leadership program, take their places among their peers in society. If they should assume positions of leadership in society (in some small way because of the leadership training they experienced in their collegiate days) then we think it is well worth the time and effort expended to make this program a success.